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ABSTRACT

Public concern about the effectiveness of education institutions and the accompanying loss of public confidence in the nation's schools has revealed itself in a growing complaint that too many teachers cannot teach. This criticism, while not fully substantiated, has resulted in efforts to establish means for testing teacher competency, seen as one of many ways to improve education. Presently, 20 states require or will require, by a definite date in the future, applicants for teacher certification to be tested for competency in either the basic skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, or some combination of these. State policies, rooted in the concern for educational improvement, are also concerned with the issue of testing teachers--whether or not it will result in, or contribute to, the improvement of education. Perhaps there are other viable alternatives to teacher candidate testing that will contribute as well or better to educational improvement. Some suggestions include: (1) raising standards for admission to teacher education programs; (2) strengthening the institutional accreditation process; (3) requiring internships before granting certification; (4) requiring continuing education on the job; (5) reforming teacher education programs; (6) lengthening preservice education; and (7) increasing teacher salaries. (JMK)

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7. Testing For Teacher Certification

The Issue

Public concern about the effectiveness of our education institutions and the accompanying loss of public confidence in our nation's schools has revealed itself in a growing complaint that too many of our teachers cannot teach. This criticism, while not fully substantiated, has resulted in efforts to establish some means whereby teacher competency can be tested. The central issue is the concern for the improvement of education. Testing teachers for competency is seen as one of many ways to do this.

Full Circle From Tests To Tests

Testing for teacher certification is not a new idea, but it has not been widely applied since colonial times, when oral and written examinations were administered by school boards and later by county superintendents. When state school systems began to emerge about 1825, certification required only the satisfactory completion of a prescribed curriculum at approved institutions. "Normal schools" supplied the curriculum; their graduates were presumed to be adequately equipped to teach school. This approach, dominant by 1910, is being challenged in 1982 by the teacher competency testing movement.

By 1976, four states (North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia and Mississippi) required passing the National Teacher Examinations (NTE) as a condition of certification. North and South Carolina have since altered their programs while the other two states continue to rely primarily on the NTE. Twenty-three states, before 1977, used the NTE for purposes such as validating credits from an unaccredited institution or for certification in specific areas such as special education.

Twenty States Test Teacher Applicants

Today, 20 states require or will require by a definite date in the future, applicants for teacher certification to be tested for competency either in the basic skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge or some combination of these. The following chart shows where these changes are taking place.

STATES REQUIRING TESTING FOR CERTIFICATION

State	Authority	Year Enacted	Year Effective	Test Used
Alabama	SBE	1980	1981	State
Arizona	Legislature	1980	1980	State
Arkansas	Legislature	1979	1983	NTE
California	Legislature	1981	1982	State
Colorado	Legislature	1981	1983	State
Connecticut	SBE	1982	1985	State
Delaware	SBE	1982	1983	NTE
Florida	Legislature	1978	1980	State
Georgia	SBE	1979	1979	State
Louisiana	Legislature	1977	1979	NTE
Mississippi	SBE	1977	1977	NTE
New Mexico	SBE	1981	1983	State
New York	SBE	1980	1984	State
North Carolina	SBE	1979	1981	State
Oklahoma	Legislature	1980	1982	State
South Carolina	Legislature	1979	1982	NTE/State
Tennessee	SBE	1980	1981	NTE
Texas	SBE/Legislature	1980/1981	1985	State
Virginia	Legislature	1980	1981	NTE
West Virginia	SBE	1982	1985	State

SBE = State Board of Education
NTE = National Teacher Examination

Competency Testing Raises Difficult Questions

Rooted in the concern for the improvement of education, the state policy issue in the testing of teachers is whether or not it will result in, or contribute to, the improvement of education. The assumption is that testing will improve instruction, which will, in turn, result in improved learning -- and that this is an "improvement of education."

Will a test weed out those who are likely to be less-than-competent teachers? Certainly, there is common agreement that one must possess a certain degree of mastery of the subject to be taught. But is such mastery in itself a sufficient guarantor of competence?

A number of states are concerned with the basic skills -- communication and computation skills. One of the criticisms of the present teaching force is that teachers cannot communicate effectively. Parents have noted grammatical and spelling errors in notes written to them or in homework assignments. Some research shows that the verbal skills of teachers have more to do with student achievement than do other factors. In states where basic-skills tests have been administered, a sizable group (as high as 20 percent) of candidates for initial certification has failed to meet the standards for the basic skills, including verbal skills. Are basic skills as important to effective teaching as subject-area mastery?

What about the techniques of teaching -- pedagogy -- those techniques learned in the professional preparation sequence in colleges of education? A recent study reveals that over one-third of the time of an elementary teaching major is spent in this kind of professional preparation. Should these skills be tested as well? Or can they be assessed better during the student teaching experience or in an intern year, as in some states?

Still other issues arise. Should a prospective teacher have to wait until four years of preparation have been invested before discovering that the preparation has not been good enough to obtain a license to teach? Should student selection standards be upgraded? Should a more rigorous course of study be required? Should a test be required before entrance into the professional preparation sequence as is true in a number of states? Would any or all of these accomplish the purpose without a teacher competency test?

All of these efforts would leave the present teaching force untouched. Is the situation so grave as to require testing of teachers presently in our classrooms? The political feasibility of such a proposal has been questioned.

Has the publicity accompanying a few examples of ineffective teachers made a mountain out of a molehill?

Can Competency Be Improved In Other Ways?

Are there viable alternatives to teacher candidate testing that will contribute as well or better to the improvement of education? There are other things that are being, or could be, done to improve teacher quality that may be more effective than a testing program. Many have been proposed. Some steps are being taken instead of, or in conjunction with, testing. They include:

- Raising standards for admission to teacher education programs. Scholastic Aptitude Test scores of education majors are generally lower than those of other professional majors. To raise the quality of candidates, some states are administering tests at the end of the sophomore year for literacy and computation skills or liberal education knowledge. At least one state has raised by law the grade-point average required for admission to teacher education schools.

- Strengthening the institutional accreditation process. More rigorous accreditation standards theoretically would result in better-trained teachers and would stress quality over quantity. However, this is a complex and lengthy process.

- Internships. Some states are requiring new teachers to serve a one-year paid internship in the classroom before full certification is granted, thus giving them an opportunity for evaluation and feedback in an on-the-job training experience. Success with this method depends upon the quality of supervision and evaluation furnished by local districts or the state.

- Continuing education. Many believe that requiring additional training while on the job, through graduate course work or district- or teacher-center workshops, holds the most promise for upgrading instruction skills. They theorize that workshops, especially, can address practical problems encountered by beginning teachers, and could be tailored to correct weaknesses identified through evaluation.

- Reforming teacher education. Others believe that because of the new demands being placed on teachers as new knowledge becomes available, as pupils become more diverse, and as more social problems are translated into education problems, a mere tinkering with the teacher

education curriculum will not suffice; a thorough overhaul is needed.

- Lengthening preservice education. Requiring a fifth year of preparation before certification is granted has been proposed for many years. To require prospective teachers to undergo a fifth year of preparation, however, may not be realistic. Other professions with five-year (or more) preparation requirements are more financially rewarding than that of teachers.

- Increasing salaries: Higher pay, as recommended by the Task Force of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), may attract more capable students to teacher education programs.

What To Read

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